

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION TIPS

Effective two-way communication is essential in all aspects of performance management.

Communicating performance expectations is the foundation for effective performance management. This is why clarifying standards and establishing measures should be a collaborative effort between the supervisor AND employee. By collaborating, both the supervisor and the employee bring valuable information to the process, and the end result is more likely to be supported, and understood, by both parties. When developed with input from employees, measures are more likely to be:

- Appropriate to the requirements of the job
- Reflective of the work context and conditions
- Understood by the employee and supervisor
- Accepted by the employee

While mutual agreement about the final measures is preferable, it is not always possible. In those cases, it is the supervisor's right to make the final decision about the appropriateness of the measures. However, mutual understanding and recognition of the standards is necessary. Feedback on performance must be an ongoing process that communicates expectations and how the employee is doing, along with what the employee should continue doing, stop doing, do less of, or start doing.

When communicating about performance, remember that the individual rating for a performance element is based on measures that describe the Fully Successful level. However, supervisors must be able to verbally describe how the employee can exceed or fail to meet the Fully Successful level.

Characteristics of Effective Communication:

- Focuses on the issue (e.g., performance); not the person
- Is specific and descriptive
- Avoids accusations
- Can be supported with documentation
- Includes descriptions of your own reactions to the issue; not the other persons
- Takes into account the needs of both the receiver and giver of feedback. It should be given to help, not to hurt.
- Is directed toward behavior that the receiver can do something about.
- Is useful when well-timed.
- It is checked to insure clear communication. One way of doing this is to have the receiver try to rephrase the feedback.

Effective communication and constructive feedback opens the way to a relationship which is built on trust, honest, and genuine concern and mutual growth.

When supervisors don't communicate effectively about performance poor performance can develop. When that happens, it becomes costly in terms of lost productivity, the impact on other employees who must pick up the workload of the poor performer, which lowers morale, and places many time demands on the supervisor. This is why it is so important that supervisors handle performance issues early through performance planning, effective communication, and feedback.

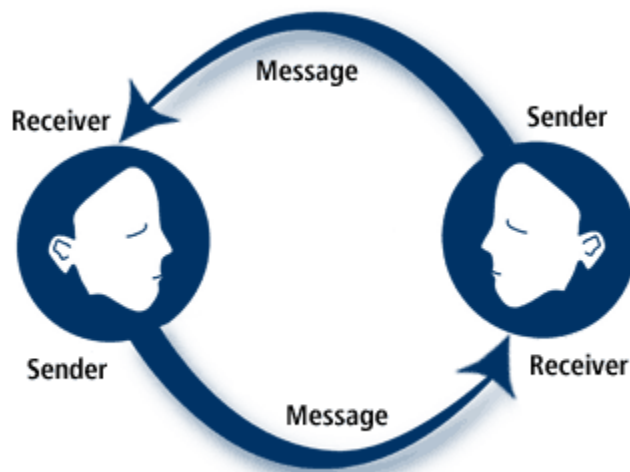
Frequent feedback to employees gives them the opportunity to correct performance deficiencies before they receive their summary appraisal.

In order to communicate effectively, we need to understand some basic principles of the interpersonal communication process. We may not think of communication as a process, but there are specific steps that occur during any communication between people.

This process involves a:

- (1) Sender, who communicates information, thoughts, feelings, and needs to a receiver; and
- (2) Receiver, who gets the message from the sender and must interpret its meaning.

In most conversations each person alternates between being a sender and a receiver. Usually, managers and supervisors communicate with employees to create specific outcomes, share information, and/or provide feedback.



Receivers may not always grasp the meaning intended by the sender due to our individual filters. Filters are those things that get in the way of sending and receiving messages; they can complicate the communication process. Types of filters include:

- Life and work experiences, beliefs, and background (culture, heritage, and upbringing);
- Assumptions: the act of taking something for granted or supposing something without proof; an unwarrantable claim; and

- Individual thinking styles, or how we take in and process information. For example, some people process visual images while others filter out the visual and process primarily auditory information.

Once you become aware of your filters, you can take steps to suspend your assumptions or revisit your understanding of the meaning of the communication. To help validate that your interpretation of the meaning is accurate:

- Identify the assumptions underlying your conclusions and actions. Are they the correct assumptions? Where did these assumptions come from?
- Revisit perceptions by being open to another meaning or interpretation of the data you have observed and alter your views as appropriate.
- Reexamine the original data. Recognize that you might be wrong about some data or that you may have drawn an incorrect conclusion.
- Communicate with the sender to get more data, verify your understanding and perceptions, and confirm whether your assumptions are valid.

EXAMPLE:

The speaker is a supervisor who is giving feedback to one of her employees. The supervisor is concerned because she received her employee's draft of a time-sensitive report 2 days late. She is also concerned because English is a second language for the employee and his grammar has been a problem. She also knows that he has been spending a lot of time working to improve his writing skills.

The supervisor says, "I know you've been working really hard lately. I've noticed the effort you've put into sharpening your writing skills. Most of your work is right on target, but in light of the difficulties you had meeting our last deadline, I'd like for us to take time today to talk about time management..."

The receiver is foreign born, with English being a second language. He is very proud that he has learned English so quickly. Also, in his native country, time is not an absolute, and does not have the same importance as it does in the United States.

The employee heard and thought the following during the conversation:

The supervisor is blaming me for missing the deadline when she edited it so much and had me spend so much time rewriting nit-picking details. Handing in my draft a few days later doesn't make that much difference. Also, nice way to butter me up by saying my writing has improved.

In this script, filters could include:

- Grammar can be difficult when English is the second language.
- Assuming that the priority was to focus on improving writing, not making the deadline.
- The supervisor focusing on her discomfort with giving negative feedback, rather than on the employee.

Give, Get, Merge

Now that you understand the communication process and the filters that may impact your ability to understand meaning, you are ready to apply the Give, Get, Merge process.

The tools and skills in this model are particularly critical to your being able to eliminate filters as you communicate performance expectations and provide feedback to your employees throughout the year.

Many of us intuitively use the Give, Get, Merge process, particularly when we are discussing differing information, opinions, or experiences. It is an effective process to use for communicating not just at work, but in all personal relationships as well.

Give Your Perspective. Communicate a concise, specific, and objective message whether you are giving an assignment, explaining a decision, expressing positive feedback, or describing a performance or behavior problem. Consider the needs of the individual when giving any message.

Get the Other Person's Perspective. Involve the other person in the discussion and listen to what he or she has to say. Ask for the person's opinions, ideas, and perspectives using open-ended questions. Listen carefully while suspending your judgment.

Merge Perspectives. Reach a mutually acceptable agreement, taking into account the other person's perspective and needs. To merge perspectives, try to find common ground, identify specific differences, and explore alternatives

You typically give your perspective in a variety of situations (e.g., when you give an assignment, explain a decision, describe performance, discuss an issue, or share information). In each of these situations, you provide the employee with detailed information so that he or she can fully understand the context.

Examples of a supervisor's discussions for these situations may include:

- Discuss the goals of the work unit and the employee's role in achieving them.
- Discuss what the employee should produce (outputs) to achieve the goals and how these outputs relate to criteria/expectations in his or her performance plan.
- Discuss the specific realistic outputs you want for each of the generic elements and standards in the performance plan.
- Explain the employee's performance and how it does or does not meet expectations.
- Discuss the requirements for completing a project, including reviewing the process the employee should follow, timeframes, and the specific format of the final product.

In giving your perspective, be concise, specific, and objective. For example, if a supervisor is describing performance that includes completing work assignments in a timely manner" what is meant by "timely"? Does it mean by the end of the week, the end of the day, within the hour, or immediately? Remember "specific" is the first part of the **"SMART"** measures process.

A key element of giving your perspective is framing the message from the point of view of the person hearing the message. Recognize that each person has different needs, interests, concerns, perceptions, and styles and, therefore, will react very differently to the message.

Supervisors must also consider the way messages are delivered. How information is given plays a significant role in an employee's ability to hear what is being said and impacts all of interactions with an employee.

Additionally, all nonverbal behavior (e.g., body language, facial expressions, and gestures) and tone of voice are significant parts of giving your perspective.

Nonverbal behavior can greatly influence the communication process. To ensure that nonverbal cues are accurately communicating your perspective:

- Keep your arms open. Crossed arms are often interpreted as a defensive posture or a closed mind.
- Maintain eye contact to show sincerity and truth.
- Lean toward the person to demonstrate that you are focusing on him or her.
- Focus on the conversation and avoid multi-tasking (e.g., talking on phone, typing an email, reading documents unrelated to the employee...)

- Keep your body still. Fidgeting often signals impatience or boredom.
- Don't take another person's reaction or anger personally, even if they lash out at you in what seems a personal manner. Another person's mood or response is more likely about fear or frustration than it is about you as an individual. Take a deep breath and count to 10 if you need, and see it as a way of letting the other person vent before he or she is able to communicate what's really on his or her mind.

You don't have to know everything

You don't have to have all the answers. It's OK to say, "I don't know." If you want to find out, say so, then follow up to share your findings. Or you may decide to work on the problem together to find the answer.

Don't react

Respond (facts); don't react (feelings) -- e.g., "Tell me more about your concern" or "I understand your frustration" instead of "Hey, 'm just doing my job (or what the Forest Supervisor told me" or "It's not my job." (which is sure to cause more irritation). Share responsibility for any communication in which you're a participant, and realize that sometimes, maybe often, your own personal reactions may be causing your frustrations about communicating with others.

Listen and you will be heard

Understand that people want to feel heard more than they care about whether you agree with them. It's strange how many people complain about others not hearing them, yet they don't listen to others either. You can show that you're listening by giving someone your complete attention and saying things like:

1. "Tell me more about your concern."
 2. "What is it about XXX that concerns you?"
 3. "I'm interested in what you've just said. Can you share a little bit about what lead you to that belief?"
 4. "What would have to happen for you to be more comfortable with XXX?"
- Remember that what someone says and what we hear can be amazingly different. Our personal filters, assumptions, judgments, and beliefs can distort what we hear. Repeat back or summarize to ensure that you understand. Restate what you think you heard and ask, "Have I understood you correctly?" If you find yourself responding emotionally to what someone said, say so, and ask for more information: "I may not be understanding you correctly, and I find myself taking what you said personally. What I thought you just said is XXX; is that what you meant?"

- Acknowledge inconvenience or frustration and offer a timeline, particularly if you need someone else's cooperation or your activities will affect them. For example, if you'll be updating someone's desktop computer system and need access to her office, you might say, "I know it's frustrating to have someone in your space at a time that might not be convenient for you, and I appreciate your cooperation. It'll help us to keep your system working well. We expect to be in your office at about 3 p.m., and out by 5 p.m." Don't offer advice unless asked. This can be tough, particularly if we have experience that we think might benefit another person. Use respectful expressions such as "One potential option is..." or "One thing that helped me in a similar situation was X. I'd be happy to share more about my experience if you think it'd be helpful to you" instead of "You should do X."
- Look for common ground instead of focusing solely on differences. What might you both be interested in (e.g., making the experience as nondisruptive as possible)? One way to begin discovering commonality is to share your underlying intention -- for example, "My intention in sharing this is to help you succeed on this project."
- Work to keep a positive mental focus. One of the choices we always have is how we see or experience any given circumstance. Many people who are considered skillful and successful, including professional athletes and cultural leaders, work to maintain a positive mind-set. Ask yourself, "What's great about this?" or "What can I learn from this?" to help maintain a positive state. Don't forget to adopt a variety of stress reduction practices that work best for you.
- Understand that most people, including you, have a unique, often self-serving, agenda. This isn't necessarily bad, because it helps us achieve and protect ourselves. Just don't assume that someone will know or share your agenda or ideas, so talking about what's most important to you and asking what's most important to others, can help build a solid foundation for conversation.
- Improve your listening skill. Most people think they listen well, but the truth is that most of people don't listen at all -- they just speak and then think about what they're going to say next. Good listening often means asking good questions and clearing your mind of distractions, including what you're going to say next, whom you're meeting with next, or what's going on outside. When someone makes prickly comments or complaints, there's often a concern or fear lurking. Like a detective, ask questions that get to the bottom of someone's real concern or agenda. Only then can you have a truly rich, beneficial conversation.

Give, Get, Merge Communication Process

Give, Get, Merge is a communication process that incorporates skills to optimize communication with your employees.

- Give your perspective in a way that the employee can understand and relate to. Show your commitment to the communication process, not to your position of power over the employee.
- Get the employee's perspective in a way that will build his or her involvement in the process. Make sure the employee knows that he or she is not merely a passive observer but, instead, an active participant in evaluation and planning.
- Merge the perspectives and strive to come to agreement to increase the likelihood of a high level of performance and success. Blend your view and your employee's view to create as clear a consensus as possible. Finish your discussion so that both of you are confident in the conclusions you've reached together.

GIVE Your Perspective

Give your perspective to communicate a clear and objective message about performance expectations/behavior—both expected and actual.

What to Do	How to Do It
1. Describe expected performance	Be concise. Express yourself completely and directly, without excessive wordiness.
2. Describe actual performance or behavior	Be objective. Keep your perspective free of emotions, personal prejudice, or judgments.
3. Describe why the performance or behavior is important	Be specific. Focus your statements on particular, distinctive actions or accomplishments.

GET Employee's Perspective

Get the employee's perspective to involve him or her in the performance management process and strengthen his or her buy-in and commitment.

What to Do	How to Do It
Attend Attending demonstrates to the speaker that you are paying attention and listening to what he/she is saying.	Give your full physical and mental attention to the employee: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Maintain eye contact.• Keep an alert but relaxed posture.• Use appropriate facial expressions.• Nod your head.• Say "I see ..." or "Uh-huh ..." to let people know they have your attention.• Be sensitive to cultural differences that may exist in a diverse workforce. (Be aware, for instance, that in some cultures maintaining direct eye contact can be offensive.)
Encourage Encouraging can stimulate or spur other people to offer you more information, insight, or ideas. It conveys to them that you are interested in what they have to say.	Draw the employee out to involve him or her in the discussion: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Do not interrupt• Provide cues that you are engaged; e.g., nod your head or respond to comments with "I see" or "Right"• Use phrases such as "Tell me more" to elicit further elaboration of ideas and concerns.
Paraphrase Paraphrasing is the key skill to make certain that you have understood the other's message. Paraphrasing is summarizing in your own words the gist of what someone has said. It: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lets the person know that you are listening• Encourages the person to expand on what he/she is saying• Helps you confirm what the person is saying before you react.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mentally summarize the key points of what the person is saying.• Reflect the gist of what the person has said in your own words. Begin with a phrase such as:<ul style="list-style-type: none">– "What I hear you saying is ... "– "In other words, you're saying ..."– "You're saying" Criteria for Effective Paraphrasing <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Interchangeable (that is, you don't take away from or add to what the person has said)• Brief• In your own words• Free from judgment (that is, you're not agreeing or disagreeing with what the person has said; you're simply acknowledging that you understand what he/she meant)

GET Employee's Perspective (continued)

What to Do	How to Do It
Ask questions Sometimes you don't have enough information to really understand what the person has said or to understand it from his/her point of view. Or you may simply need to elicit more information about a situation. The best way to do this is to ask questions.	Closed Questions <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Are used to elicit a "yes" or "no" or other limited response—a finite amount of information; provide only the information you ask for (assuming you know what questions to ask).• Typically begin with "have," "is," "can," and "do." Examples include:<ul style="list-style-type: none">– "Is 2 days enough time?"– "Can Pat handle the job given her skill level?"– "Does this computer error occur often?"• Are used to elicit quick facts and stimulate closure; most useful for confirming understanding or agreement. For example, "Did I understand you correctly when you said that...?" Open-Ended Questions <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Can yield a great deal of information; are used for gathering information, understanding a problem or concern, drawing out, solving problems.• Often begin with "how," "what," "why," "when," "where," or phrases such as "Tell me about" Examples include:<ul style="list-style-type: none">– "How do you think we should proceed?"– "Tell me about"• Encourage participation in the communication process or participation at a deeper level.
Listen for content	Reflect back what you heard, in your own words, to ensure that you understand what the employee has said.
Listen for feelings	Pay attention to more than just the words the employee uses: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Observe the employee's nonverbal language (body language, facial expressions)• Listen to what the employee is saying and how he or she is saying it (tone, volume, pacing)• Reflect back the feelings.

MERGE Perspectives

Merge perspectives to achieve agreement and alignment on issues related to performance—what performance is expected, what actual performance is, etc.

What to Do	How to Do It
1. Identify goals	Keep in mind the desired outcome of the discussion with the employee: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Successful completion of a specific job, task, or behavior,• Support of your professional relationship with the employee, or• A combination of both.
2. Find common ground	Look for and build on similarities in interests, summarizing areas of agreement.
3. Determine specific differences	Identify where you and the employee differ.
4. Explore alternatives	Use a merge strategy—such as integrate, compromise, or accommodate—that will move you and the employee toward the goal.

Depending on your goals for the performance discussion, you will use one of the following five **strategies for merging perspectives**.

Strategy	Outcome	When to Use
Integrate	Fully incorporates the perspectives of both you and the employee	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• You want to create a solution because you both have concerns that are too important to be compromised.• You need to pull together various insights on how to deal with a problem.• You want to increase the level of commitment from the employee.• You need to work through contentious feelings that have been interfering with your relationship with the employee.

Strategy	Outcome	When to Use
Compromise	Meets some, but not all, concerns/needs of both you and the employee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The goals you and the employee have set are moderately important, but not worth the effort or potential disruption of fighting it out. • You want to achieve temporary settlements to complex issues. • You need to arrive at an expedient solution under time pressure.
Accommodate	Fully supports the employee's concerns/needs, without meeting your concerns/needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You lack information regarding a situation. It is counterproductive to maintain an uninformed position, so the best resolution may be to accept the employee's views as the blueprint for agreement. • The issue is more important to the employee than to you. Yielding to the employee's position is a goodwill gesture that can help maintain a cooperative relationship. • You and the employee have conflicting viewpoints on especially controversial issues. You may decide that avoiding disruption is more important than forcing a resolution with which neither of you is happy.
Avoid	Neither your nor the employee's concerns/needs can be addressed; decision is postponed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The dividing issue is trivial. • The potential damage of confronting a conflict outweighs the benefits of its resolution. • You or the employee needs to cool down (to reduce tensions and to regain perspective and composure). • You believe that others could resolve the conflict more effectively.
Impose	Fully meets your concerns, without considering or incorporating the employee's concerns/needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You must resolve important issues that require the implementation of unpopular courses of action. • You know you are right and the issues at stake are vital to the organization's welfare. • There are time constraints and you must set deadlines for the completion of work.